Research Article

# Footnotes to History: Márkus's Critique of Habermas's Debate with the Budapest School in the Philosophical Discourses of Modernity

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**Philosophy, it has been said, lives on through the ongoing disputes between individual philosophers. This paper brings the stakes of one such debate into view. It falls into two parts: the first examines Jürgen Habermas's critique of the Budapest School and its contribution to the paradigm of production within a contemporary version of the philosophy of praxis. The second analyses György Márkus's critique of Habermas's criticism of the work of the Budapest School. He argues that at its core Habermas's work remains 1. Stubbornly ahistorical and 2. At odds with a contemporary modern scientific approach. The more radical historicist Márkus appeals to a combination of empiricism and anthropological optimism as a practical and critical "gamble" on the future in the true spirit of the Enlightenment. This paper argues that Márkus's critique of Habermas provides the model of a contemporary critical theory that marries cutting edge modern social science with a practical engagement with the key problems of modernisation like climate change, pandemics or on going modernising post-secular societies.**

In a tradition as richly crowded as that of the history of Western philosophy, it is almost impossible to produce novel insights or new discoveries. Deeply steeped in the historical philosophical tradition, it is not surprising that Habermas locates and evaluates philosophical ideas as mere variations on already well contested and recontested ways of thinking about ourselves in the world. When Habermas critically engages with the Budapest School's version of Western Marxism, he does so in recognition of the importance of a conversation to be had that might further our comprehension of major questions for our times.

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## 1. Habermas on the Budapest School's "Heretical" Philosophy of Praxis.

For Habermas, the modern theories of modernity derive their basic concepts from the philosophy of reflection. The origins of this type of theory are grounded in the modern theory of the subject: we cannot know the world as it is, only as it is to be understood through our own biological conceptual equipment and categories. However, the immediate connection to reason is not obvious in the basic concepts of the philosophy of praxis. The latter critiqued the idealism of subject centred philosophy derived from Hegel's critique of Kant. Habermas insists that the critique of the unconditioned subject that inspired the philosophy of praxis did not entail the forfeiture of a commitment to reason as the measure of communicative interaction. The philosophy of praxis focuses on the critique and experience of capitalist reification: the blockage of historical self-consciousness overwhelmed by the thing-like phenomena of the calcification of the commodity in market societies. Nonetheless, the philosophy of praxis also had to negotiate Max Weber's early twentieth century grasp of the internal contradictions of a liberal capitalist society and the contributions made by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to an appreciation of the living complexity of modern cultural life. The early Lukács's version of the philosophy of praxis tipped the balance towards these later "bourgeois" contributions, neglecting an immediate appeal to the paradigm of production and instead focusing on the critical experience of rationalisation as reification. This unbalancing becomes, for Habermas, the source of critical theory in the work of the early Herbert Marcuse which derives the concept of praxis from the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. The two sources of the philosophy of praxis only converge when the paradigm of production shifts its focus from production to communication. For Habermas, the theory of communication secures the internal connection between practice and rationality.

Habermas's interest lies in the renewal of the paradigm of production that derives from phenomenology. His focus is on the work of two key thinkers in the Budapest School tradition. Heller and Márkus take their bearings from the late work of György Lukács. His final *Aesthetics* returned to the themes of early work in *History and Class Consciousness*[1]. In his late anthropology Lukács rehabilitates the concept of practice in terms of "the world of everyday life", a world of natural languages, of family and social interactions and Agnes Heller's early work would develop the concept of objectivation from Lukács's concept of everyday life.[2]

The traditional Aristotelian concept of form in human life involves the unfolding of essential powers through its own productive activity. This initial concept was reworked in the German Idealist tradition and then refashioned by German Romanticism, Feuerbach and Marx. However, this understanding of productive activity is taken over by Husserl with his version of transcendental consciousness within an empirical sociology viewed as a process of the externalisation and appropriation by the subjective genius. Productive artistic achievement is primarily an achievement of subjective self-reflection. Husserl goes even further to equate the notion of objectification with reification: the products of human creativity and activity can appear as something other than human products[3]. Heller's achievement was to translate this essentially idealist paradigm from the philosophy of reflection and transpose it into a materialist framework

Yet, Habermas sees three new problems emerging from this transposition. Heller views institutions and linguistic forms as objectivations common to the species just like those other products of labour. Habermas raises the question of how the so understood paradigm of labour relates to other forms produced by the subject. Secondly, given such a naturalist interpretation of the concept of practice, can any normative content be derived from such a metabolic exchange between nature and humans? Finally, the Marxian idea of the end of history based upon labour so understood, projects a utopic idea of history that reinstates a Hegelian style teleology that no longer seems plausible from a modern scientific standpoint.[4]

To discuss these questions, Habermas turns to the work of György Márkus. In what sense can the instruments of the labour process be understood as objectifications of human labour? Márkus's argument has three steps or stages.

1). Márkus maintains that the meaning of the objective elements of the lifeworld are not just technical rules but also require the social conventions of use. The use-value of any commodity represents not only the labour process expended but also the context and the social needs whose satisfaction it serves. Márkus emphasises the social character of "natural objects". Objectifications presuppose a process of appropriation that has an essential conventional dimension of uses that are followed and interiorised.

2). Technical rules are mediated by their commercial distribution and property ownership: both factors condition means of production and the wealth produced. Thus, these norms produce differential rights and duties. Hence, social practice appears under a twofold aspect: a process of production and appropriation but also a process of interaction regulated by social norms.

3). The paradigm of production signifies a unity of dual processes, which comprehends social practice simultaneously as labour and as the reproduction of social relations. Here Márkus describes with great clarity the interaction between the technical, utilitarian rules for reproducing products, and also the rules of social interaction. Márkus demonstrates that the paradigm of production unifies the two elements of technics and social interaction that Habermas claims to be bereft of normative content. Correlatively, Márkus also proposes a clear analytical separation between "technical" and "social" spheres.[5] Until now a merely analytical distinction between the technical and the social has obscured the real fusion of the two: the forces and relations of production as mutually determined. Habermas is clearly mistaken in maintaining that Márkus's paradigm of production is only fit for the explanation of labour but not for that of social interaction. That is: socialism is characterised by the fact that "it reduces material-productive activity to that which they are and always in their specificity", namely, merely an active rational metabolism with nature, i.e. a purely technical activity.

This brings us to the second difficulty in Habermas's account. This concerns the normative contents of practice as interpreted in terms of production. If the metabolic relation with nature is a circular process in which production and consumption stimulate each other, this presents two criteria for evaluating social evaluation. 1). Increases in technically useful knowledge and 2). Differentiation as well as the universalisation of human needs that has a key social dimension. Both can be subsumed under the functionalist viewpoint of increasing complexity but no one today could deny that the quality of life in society has improved also by increased the social complexity of social systems. The bureaucratisation of great modern social systems often has unintended negative consequences for citizens. For Habermas, the metabolic model suggested by the paradigm of production finally has little normative content. But is this true? Can the notion of autonomy and critical norms be recovered from the philosophy of praxis so understood?

Márkus makes normative use of the distinction between a practice regulated by technical-utilitarian rules under the constraints of external nature and a sphere in which we are ourselves ultimately responsible for all necessities. The category of social labour is given pride of place in critical social theory: as a practical truth in a socialist society. According to Habermas, an emancipatory perspective does not issue from the paradigm of production alone. For him, it is rather the paradigm of action orientated to mutual understanding that is needed to orient an emancipatory politics. As he sees it, the paradigm of production says nothing about this emancipatory dimension.

## 2. Márkus's Response to and Critique of Habermas[6]

Interestingly, Márkus agreed with some of Habermas's criticisms of various so-called post-modern thinkers, especially in their investments in the mere "play" of significations in the domain of discourses. Márkus also often critiques the so-called leaders of this post -modern movement like Barthes, Derrida and even Foucault. Unlike Heller, he never took a post-modern turn. The later Heller was always more open to contemporary fashions and more willing to dally with and incorporate them into her own perspective.

Markus maintains that his own defence of reason is significantly more historical, and that Habermas's position is ultimately ahistorical. Despite their shared criticisms of the post-modernists, Márkus makes clear that a significant dispute exists between them over the normative power of the paradigm of production He acknowledges that Habermas has already rejected his criticisms in earlier works like *Language and Production*[7]. For Márkus, Habermas reduces the whole of historical development to the sole axis of instrumental rationality and to the evolution of mastery over nature. Habermas's one-sided account refuses to acknowledge that normative content can be derived from the paradigm of production. Habermas's response to his critique is misplaced, according to Márkus, because his own understanding of the paradigm of production implies a dualist, double relation both to the human relation to nature as a technical relation and as a set of intersubjective social relations. Habermas insists that the Márkusian argument supports his own view that Marx has not sufficiently appreciated the normative dimension of inter-human relations.

This critique involves two misunderstandings. Markus maintains that the normative element pertains to all forms of human activities including material/technical activity and normativity is not confined to language. The way in which these other norms and rules govern material activity and material discourse is not to be explained only within the paradigm of language and these other types of norms have a logic other than linguistic ones. Marx understands intercourse between humans according to the division of the paradigm of labour. This is fundamentally different from the paradigm of language. The division of labour presupposes social interests that have different but complementary competences.[8]

Márkus's second point is that Habermas has not sufficiently acknowledged the extent to which he had continued along the Marxian line: Habermas is much closer to the late teleological Marx than he would admit. The later Marx has like Habermas, a more determinist understanding of historical

evolution, they both maintain a rigid division between man's relation to nature and social interaction. Markus agrees that while there needs to be a distinction between the human relation to nature and that of social relations, this differentiation is necessarily historically founded, socially changeable and contestable. These basic changes are shifting and matters of historical and social struggle.[9]

Habermas's aspiration is to produce a universal theory but Márkus thinks that this is neither realisable nor desirable. The late Habermas became less rigid as he responded to the challenges of modern globalisation in his post-modern phase.[10], but his position remains problematic. Traditional philosophy makes universal claims that cannot be vindicated, and, in this single respect, Márkus is a post-modernist. To him, Habermas remains ahistorical and employs ahistorical normative assumptions and teleology. For Márkus, in our current historical time and situation we cannot believe in a natural biological foundation of knowledge. Discontinuity of historical processes resists such universalising aspirations. Here Márkus asserts that such historical discontinuity has a prophylactic role which destroys illusions. Deconstruction is symptomatic of modern insight and indeterminacy. While our perspective is partial and particular, for Márkus the modern aspiration is to universalise our individual perspective. This leads to modern pluralism and the commitment to explore all such limits. Philosophy does not provide positive knowledge in the sense of the natural sciences. It offers a conceptual narrative that enlightens our current situation. However, it needs to be coherent and meet current standards of modern scientificity. Such a conceptual narrative needs to have a good story and to be meaningful.

While Habermas wanted to distance himself from Marx's paradigm of production and its contemporary interpreters, Márkus finds that Habermas's lop-sided account of the sources of our normative motivations owes more to the determinist, philosophical groundings of Marx's later critical theory that belongs to the past. Márkus died in 2017. However, this remains a live debate of great contemporary significance for critical theory today. Markus continued to endorse the paradigm of production and relinquishing the search for certitude his critical theory grasps the fleeting normative possibilities thrown up by the social present and its emancipatory hopes and options. Markus provides us with a theoretical framework that continues to allow us to think through these ongoing contemporary challenges.

## About the Author

John has published two single authored books, edited seven others, and published 63 individual articles and book chapters. He is also an international expert on the Budapest School in Australia and lectured around the world in Harbin and Chengdu China, Budapest, Warsaw and the United States. Invited to mentor young doctoral Students at Heilongjang University, China.

## Footnotes

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[2]. J.Habermas, J. *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge, 197l, pp-76-77.

[3]. J. Habermas, J. ibid, 78.

[4]. J. Habermas, op cit, p.79.

[5]. J.Habermas, ibid, p79.

[6]. The best response to Habermas's critique of the Budapest School's interpretation of the paradigm of more production is found in an Interview conducted by Anthony Uhlmann in an Interview with György Márkus in the journal "Active; Reactive" march, 1993

[7]. G. Márkus, *Language and P*roduction, Reidel, Netherlands, 1983

[8]. "Active/Reactive" op cit, p.43.

[9]. Active/Reactive, op cit, P, 44.

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